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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the methods used to teach identity formation in a college course entitled "Identity and Society," through an exploration of the autobiographies of several prominant Americans. The three phases of an autobiographical approach to one's present identity are discussed as the search for facts according to criteria, illustrated by the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: the structuring of these facts by an ordering principle of time or content, explained by the ideas of John Locke; and the use of memory to discover new information about oneself, explored through the writings of David Hume. Activities to help students develop each phase of autobiographical recognition include: (1) the organization of life into phases; (2) the meshing of life facts into the conceptual scheme of different psychologists; (3) a review of autobiographies in terms of time and content structures; (4) the writing of a semester-long journal to develop analogies between personal experiences and the experiences of the historical individuals; (5) the recall of past events; and (6) the review of self as a third person. (NRB)

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TEACHING AUTOBIOGRAPHY WITH THE HELP OF HOBBES, LOCKE, AND HUME

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA, March 25-28, 1981.

Teaching Autobiography with the Help of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume

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Autobiography, the relating of one's life, is a manner of self-expression we may infer to have always existed; the telling of one's life satisfies many dimensions of being human, whether one be the teller or the listener. Nevertheless, formal autobiography did not become a customary part of Western culture until the eighteenth century--the Age of Enlightenment. The eighteenth century was a period when men and women claimed that an individual life was equal in value to any other life merely because it existed, that each person had the right to determine the political system which would govern him, and that each person had the right to pursue a self-defined happiness with means that were self-determined.

Autobiography was a natural tool to give individuals courage to make such assertions. Encourage a person to ascertain the facts of his existence, help him shape them into a coherent structure, and guide him in the naming of values held, skills possessed, and actions accomplished, and you will see an individual assert with certainty and courage his own existence. Two eighteenth century personalities who helped provide this guidance for their peers and thousands who came after were Benjamin Franklin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Franklin and Rousseau were very different personalities, with temperaments poles apart, but both agreed in the value of autobiography, that the telling of one's life was self-educational and educational for others. The story of their lives gave Western society autobiographical models which became standards for asserting and learning what a life has to tell.

We live in the late twentieth century in an age that has begun to rediscover the healthy positivism of the 18th century. The assertion of one's own self, based upon the accurate evidence of one's actual life, can

transform "everyman" into a self-possessed, autonomous person, who can meet his present and future with a certitude gained from his past. Franklin had this self-assurance, even before the stormy years of the American Revolution, as a result of self-analysis; he writes in his first attempt at autobiography in 1771:

> As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances. That good fortune, when I reflected on it, which is frequently the case, has induced me sometimes to say that were if left to my choice, I should have no objection to go over the same life from it beginning to the end, only asking the advantage authors have of correcting in a second edition some faults of the first. (Franklin, 1952, p. 3.)

Rousseau, too, evidences the buoyancy which comes from self-analysis:

> I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.
>
> Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. Whether Nature did well or ill in breaking the mould in which she formed me, is a question which can only be resolved after the reading of my book. (Rousseau, 1954, p. 17.)

We may take issue with Rousseau's lack of modesty, but he has given us a model for the carefully detailed self history which even today can help us organize our personal past.

The students I teach are not overtly concerned with personal identity unless they are asked to explicitly consider their own. American culture shows increasing signs that individuals are implicitly caught up with a desire for clear personal identity, often exhibiting symptoms of identity crises, but the culture has yet to make time and opportunity in its social norms for the formulation of personal identity as a necessary activity. Public education began to incorporate identity activities into the K-12 curricula in the 1960s: language experience education which stressed an

on-going sense of personal history, magic circle discussion groups, self-concept sessions for behavioral as well as non-behavioral problem students, and the many identity related activities of the new approaches to citizenship education were among the valuable activities which brought a new dimension to our society's conscious development of the individual.[1] Alas, with budget cuts these "frills" of human development are the first to go.

Fortunately, at the University of Louisville, as I write this paper, our interdisciplinary undergraduate degree program still exists, and is dedicated to the self-enrichment of students between 17 and whatever age academic inquiry ceases (we have students in their 70s). I am especially interested in helping the individual formulate personal identity for I feel that human health requires a clear sense of what one's own interests, tastes, notions, skills, and so forth are. I teach a course called Identity and Society which has as one of its major goals the formulation of identity in each student. Another major goal is an appreciation of identity formulation in the several types of high civilization that have been part of our Western heritage. Comparing oneself with others who have lived in history helps us to appreciate divergent models of identity formulation as well as locating methods and ideas that help us with our own identity. Identity is what we perceive ourselves as being, and as I will discuss, it can depend upon diverse criteria, it can be structured according to several systems of cultural logic, and, it can be relatively more or less important to the person given the sociological norms of the age. (Character may be a more constant entity in culture as it is what humans do, not how they view what they do.)

My concern that a solid historical framework be provided for the practice of identity formulation has led to my teaching the course over the past five years with a range of autobiographies in one culture, spanning 200 years: the United States from the maturity of Benjamin Franklin to the present.

The course employs five to seven autobiographies that comprehend the several generations. Any culture over sufficient time could provide the bases for this historical dimension to identity formulation. Italy is a culture that comes to mind as rich in autobiographical sources and providing a diversity of cultural attitudes towards identity formulation over a wide range of years.

The advantage of using the United States as a model is not only its relevance for the present student, but the English-speaking philosophers who helped to establish modern thought on human identity were integral to the institutional norms of law, education, and governance in our society. Three Englishmen, in particular, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), and David Hume (1711-1776), were significant to our thought and institutional development in the 18th century, and their ideas persist in their relevance to legal, educational, and political considerations of human identity today.

Thomas Hobbes, in Elements of Philosophy Concerning Body (Hobbes, 1963), posed an ancient Greek riddle apt for formulating human identity. Hobbes said, what if you have a wooden ship named Theseus that you repair plank by plank, nail by nail, until every part of the ship is replaced by a new part. Meanwhile, you have stored each item replaced in a pile behind the original ship. After replacing each part in the original ship, you reconstruct the stored parts into a second ship. The riddle: which is the ship Theseus? Your answer will depend upon the criterion of identity you choose to structure your vision of the real ship; let us review some possibilities:

1 - If you feel that the original materials themselves determine which is the real ship Theseus, the reconstructed ship would be the one.

2 - If you feel that the historical act of creation must determine the ship, then even though each part was replaced, the first ship is still the Theseus.

3 - Both ships could be a Theseus if we argue by analogy to the biological processes of cloning in which new individuals are created identical in pattern, but different in substance.

There are undoubtedly other ways of answering this riddle, but each answer should seek to base itself on facts of some sort, and adhere to a logical argument. One should resist a contemporary mode of thought which would call the ships Theseus I and Theseus II without a reason.

Thomas Hobbes lived in the midst of the political storms of 17th Century England. His Leviathan argued for a strong, ordering authority in government arrived at by mutual consent. His views on identity recognized that various forms of ordering one's facts of experience, attributing meaning to one's life, indeed, determining who one was, depended upon a guiding criterion. One defined one's terms well, and the self-evidence of everyday experience would support a clear sense of identity, as well as a life ordered by coherent principle. The aspects of identity that suit the formulation of human identity are various, but any aspect does function as a mechanism that sends a thread back into memory to sort into meaningful patterns past and present experience. In the Identity and Society course I have the students organize their life into phases according to several preferred aspects; I have them develop critical essays on the lives of historical individuals based on one or several aspects of identity. Among the aspects used are early memories, family, interests, ideas, purposes, work, influences, emotions and tastes, personal territories, values, skills, preferred everyday activities, social labels, and one's own language style.

Giving shape to oneself is the synthetic act which gives the facts gathered according to aspects of identity their proper weight, meaning, and continuity. Often, there is more than one way to understand oneself; each path an aspect suggests can open another facet of ourselves. I tell the students in this first phase of the course to consider themselves rebuilding the ship Theseus as they turn to their lives. A modern thinker has put it, "We are like sailors who must rebuild our ship on the open sea, we cannot

return to port, nor can we always choose only the best parts" (Otto Neurath); we are launched into life without a clear vision of ourselves, and life seems to demand that we reach a coherent understanding while in the midst of the adventure. Analyzing our life according to distinct aspects is the first step of a critical, autobiographical process that can help us gain a sense of integrity while continuing to live in the midst of events.

The second phase of an autobiographical approach to one's present identity, and a weighing of it that permits modification and augmentation, is made possible by the logical thought of John Locke. Locke stressed the importance of structuring the facts of identity, i.e. the data developed according to certain aspects, into a coherent vision of oneself that bordered on a philosophy of life, a story of oneself, or, at the minimum, a set of conscious operating principles that determined what reality was. Locke offered not only justification for the authority of every individual to determine his own life meaning, he discussed the skills of the reasoning process which would make possible the personal structuring of identity.

Locke's view of personal identity paralleled his democratic view of the individual: each person is born a human animal without any inherited dispositions; experience and education determine the basic elements of human character; the individual is free to shape his life for better or for worse when he reaches the age of adult competence. In the work which outlines these views, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Locke also articulated the several mental operations which underlie autobiographical exercise--among them, the skills of perception, remembrance, contemplation, reasoning, judging, and demonstrating with certitude.

Locke stressed that identity and character are not necessarily congruent unless the individual makes a conscious effort to shape his character according to concepts of personal identity arrived at through reflection. One must study his own habits, qualities, and accomplishments. Personal

identity is what we know about ourselves, and character is what we do habitually. We do not always recognize the traits of our character, and cannot speak of, or even perceive these traits until they are identified through description, and raised to concept through careful definition. What one can name in himself becomes one's identity; the intellectual, emotional, and social skills of the individual may then shape these qualities into permanent traits of character. Locke held that whatever went unrecognized, thus not accessible to correction or improvement, was not part of one's personal identity. This latter appreciation is a highly radical position, and, one which underlies our modern conception of temporary insanity; if one acts and is unaware of his actions, unable to recall what he did or his role in an event, one may be said to not have a personal identity at that particular time. Thus, one must exercise attention and will at all times in order to maintain a coherent personality.

It is appropriate to consider John Locke at some length as we discuss the value of autobiography, for he has provided modern autobiography with its fundamental principles and skills. Reviewing him enables us to see the origin of contemporary perspectives and issues of personal identity. Locke has provided modern philosophy, law, and psychology with principles of personal identity that still hold sway. When modern philosophers write of personal identity, John Locke is critical in every reflection;[2] when jurists debate the polemical principle of temporary insanity, it is Locke they affirm or refute; and, when individuals seek to overcome the turbulence and uncertainty of modern culture, it is to Locke's positivistic notion of self-definition and self-assertion that they turn. His methodology which emphasizes structuring the content of present consciousness is used in growth and awareness groups, and behavioral psychology, which stresses positive reinforcement as a means of shaping and guiding personal behavior.

Among the structuring principles that may provide the depth and scope to provide a life with overall coherence are those of time and content. As to time, personal identity can be an outgrowth of a chronological sequence of events; it can be the result of biological stages of development; and, it can be the product of cyclical patterns of behavior, activities, or other forces that impinge on the individual. Within one of these structuring principles of time, the scope and dimension chosen will provide a more refined coherence: one may be interested in the history of childhood, professional life, or family life. Moreover, few or many events may be dealt with in each temporal phase chosen. Some of the most profound biographies have been only a few years length and limited in their dimension to only a few events in the period considered.

The content principle by which one structures diverse facts of one's life can be borrowed from literature, religion, psychology, sociology, and other cultural studies. One should not shy away from the humanistic or scientific structures developed as meaning systems by others; one must feel at liberty to use meaning systems judiciously, as heuristic insights. One might approach the facts gathered with the help of the identity criterion of family, and use a sociological principle, such as sibling rivalry to make a coherent structure from diverse events, and yet, one can also apply a Freudian etiology in turning to one's interactive facts with parents.

With the students in Identity and Society, I introduce exercises in weaving facts of their life into the conceptual schema of various sociologists and psychologists. I also have them review the role classic cultural stories have had in providing episodic sequences to the way they believe life operates. We review American autobiographies with an eye for time structures and content structures.

The introduction of a semester long journal in the course which has as its objective the development of analogies between the student's

personal experience and the experience of the historical individual studied is another Lockean exercise in the structuring of personal identity. Fashioning interesting and empirically detailed analogies between the life of a culturally significant person of the past, and one's own life, furthers the Lockean demand for a strong, self-assured consciousness of self. The mental review of the facts of one's life, and the careful review of the historical individual, a searching, empirical analysis in both instances is followed by syntheses of meaning applied to the historical individual and oneself. The resultant detailed analogy provides the student with an identity statement that has cultural-historical depth, and a flexibility that comes from the conceiving of identity data in terms of a relational system.

The third phase of an autobiographical approach to one's present identity is made possible by the thought of David Hume. This third phase is somewhat more exacting than the search for facts according to criteria, or the structuring of the facts by an ordering principle of time or content: it is using memory to discover new information about oneself.

What Locke neglected was long-term memory. He said that what we forget about ourselves, or what occurred in the past, is not as significant as what is present in our behavior and what we can include in our behavior in the future. His neglect of memory and slighting of past experience was the consequence of the pain and tumult through which he lived. Locke was a child of the many 17th century political revolutions in England; he once said, "I no sooner perceived myself in the world, but I found myself in a storm that has lasted almost hitherto (Fowler, p.2)" Locke became a "here and now" person; his stress on building on the best of the present was an understandable reaction to much that he wished to forget.

David Hume opposed many of Locke's ideas, and in his philosophy considered memory in a profound manner which has led to the present discipline of depth psychology. Where Locke stressed consciousness of the present, Hume wrote:

> As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, it is to be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person. But having once acquired this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed. For how few of our past actions are there, of which we have any memory? Who can tell me, for instance, what were his thoughts and actions on the first of January 1715, the eleventh of March 1719, and the third of August 1733? Or will he affirm, because he has entirely forgot the incidents of these days, that the present self is not the same person with the self of that time; and by that means overturn all the most established notions of personal identity? In this view, therefore, memory does not so much <u>produce</u> as <u>discover</u> personal identity, by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. It will be incumbent on those who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity, to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our memory. (Hume, 1974, pp. 274-8.)

David Hume's emphasis that memory <u>discovers</u> personal identity, rather than producing it through selective recovery, is against Locke's notion that what we do not remember is not us. Hume insisted, as Sigmund Freud did later, that we are what we have experienced, and that we can enlarge our identity by discovering long forgotten incidents.

We should not delude ourselves that our past life is either unimportant to our present or beyond recovery. In fact, given the findings of contemporary, developmental psychology, we have poor justification in arbitrarily defining a personal identity that does not find its lines of definition from the past selves of our childhood, youth, adolescence, and continuing maturity. Too much Locke can lead to fictionalizing the present image of ourselves; we must look to the facts of our past to see ourselves truly. A difficult undertaking, but the work of twentieth century psychology eases the way.

The insights of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and other depth psychologists of the twentieth century who have contributed to the study of identity and

and character, bring out the need to develop skills of memory which can penetrate the various ages of our past development, amplifying partial images into full tableaus of past experience, as well as the need to think critically about the facts we identify in such introspection.

Happily, the work of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and others, offers us methods whereby we can plumb these depths of memory. Many of the techniques of depth psychology can be used in self-guided reflection on personal identity. Constructing an autobiography is not psychotherapy; it is a consciously creative series of reflections which are less emotive than therapy, and more valuable for reinforcing one's awareness of personal skills, values, interests, tastes, and the many other criteria of personal identity, than therapy, which seeks solutions to a present problem, or supports present growth, not stressing the articulation of traits of character that constitute personal identity.

A strong personal identity, one that is flexible, yet constructed from the true data of our experience, can support and facilitate therapy. The maladjustments and distortions that come from the minor or major trauma of experience, if they are to be discovered and healed, require an ego that can participate in the discovery, and integrate the new information into an adequate sense of present identity. The autobiographical exercise of memory discovery allows for a glancing off of areas in which a therapist must be present as a guide. Autobiographical memory discovery is equivalent to the exercises in self-analysis followed by Freud in the writing of Interpretation of Dreams. Much information can be acquired that leads to new perspectives on the past and the present, however, any deep-seated pathologies remain hidden because of the natural limits of a fallible ego. If the person gets too close to painful material, a repression, a sublimation, or other defenses, will naturally occur.

The exercises I pursue with the students to develop this third phase of autobiographical recognition--the discovery of new facts of self through

memory--are of two kinds. One is the mental recall of past events which are sought initially by theme, such as past achievement, past love affair, past family gatherings, and then, by visualizing the event in its detailed mental imagery, the person is exposed to facts which may shed new light on the event, or even facts that are new in themselves. (Freud's view that such memories may be fictional in themselves is understood (Freud, 1959); an individual's analysis of the scenario recalled still provides key images which could in therapy open up the realm of experience screened in the memory. Moreover, grappling consciously with the memory to identify and ascribe significance to specific images could allow the person to assimilate painful material in the due measure such self-analysis permits.)

The second kind is the viewing of oneself as a third person, which allows one to review both past events in which he or she was engaged as one would watch a film of oneself. In this activity, the student writes about "he" or "she" performing a certain act. This sharp objective view, which is solidly behavioral, and excludes motivation, provides data which in its empirical fullness (in a phenomenological sense) can be the bases for an inferential process that lends new meanings for the event reviewed. Variations of this third person approach has been used by Allen L. Edwards in his personality inventory (Edwards, 1966) and by the German expressionist writer, Franz Kafka, in his series of reflections entitled "He" (Er)(Kafka, 1975). Both Edwards and Kafka help one to perceive oneself in an initially harsh, yet greatly informative light.

Autobiography is a human act, an anthropological fact of how we may operate if we so choose. Respecting the views and the lives of our cultural predecessors can only enrich our present as particular individuals in the human story.

Footnotes

[1] I have included in the bibliography several examples of the aforementioned educational program that further personal identity in the student. I have included a work by MaryAnne Hall on language experience education; I selected a bibliography on values education compiled by Douglas Superka and others which is outstanding in its thorough review of current pedagogy; and, I have included two works on what may broadly be called "humanistic education" in its attention to dimensions of "self-concept" and "affective" learning: one is an anthology of readings, edited by Read and Simon, which includes pieces by psychologist educators such as Carl Rogers and Alfred S. Altschuler; the other is on the concept of confluent education by George Isaac Brown.

[2] I will mention one contemporary philosopher of identity whose work is not alone in assuring the contemporary relevance of John Locke to questions of personal identity, but who is one of the best writers on the subject: David Wiggins. See the bibliography.

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